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U.S. Department of State

Bahrain Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a hereditary emirate with few democratic institutions and no political parties. The Al Khalifa extended family has ruled Bahrain since the late 18th century and dominates its society and government. The Constitution confirms the Amir as hereditary ruler. The current Amir, Shaykh Isa Bin Sulman Al Khalifa, governs Bahrain with the assistance of a younger brother as Prime Minister, the Amir's son as Crown Prince, and an appointed cabinet of ministers. In 1975 the Government suspended some provisions of Bahrain's 1973 Constitution, including those articles relating to the National Assembly, which the Government disbanded in the same year. There are few judicial checks on the actions of the Amir and his Government. Bahrainis belong to the Shi'a and Sunni sects of Islam, with the Shi'a comprising over two-thirds of the indigenous population. The Sunnis predominate because the ruling family is Sunni and is supported by the armed forces, the security service, and powerful Sunni and Shi'a merchant families. Bahrain experienced considerable political unrest throughout the year, including bomb and arson attacks on public and private property.

The Ministry of Interior is responsible for public security. It controls the Public Security Force (police) and the extensive Security Service, which are responsible for maintaining internal order. The Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) is responsible for defending against external threats; however, during the year it was called upon to deal with civil unrest. The security forces committed numerous serious human rights abuses.

Bahrain has a mixed economy, with government domination of many basic industries, including the important oil and aluminum industries. Possessing limited oil and natural gas reserves, Bahrain is

intensifying efforts to diversify its economic base and has attracted companies doing business in banking, financial services, oilfield services, and light manufacturing. The Government has used its modest oil revenues to build an advanced transportation and telecommunications infrastructure. Bahrain has become a regional financial and business center. Tourism, particularly via the causeway linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, is also a significant source of income.

The Government's human rights record worsened in 1996. The main human rights problems continue to include the denial of the right of citizens to change their government; political and other extrajudicial killings; torture; deteriorating prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention; involuntary exile; limitations on or the denial of the right to a fair public trial, especially in the Security Court; infringements on citizens' right to privacy; and restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, and worker rights. Domestic violence against women and discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, and sex remain problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killings

During the year, in an effort to control civil disturbances, measures taken by the police and security forces resulted in the deaths of five persons. In at least one case, the police may have beaten to death a young man in custody. Most of the deaths occurred when police used force on crowds of antigovernment demonstrators.

On January 5, during a peaceful demonstration in the Al-Qafool area of downtown Manama, security forces shot an unidentified 16-year-old male in the leg who was then fatally struck by a vehicle when he attempted to flee the scene. On May 3, Fadhel Abbas Marhoon of the village of Karzakkan was fatally shot by a patrolling BDF unit. On July 2, 17-year-old Ali Taher was shot and killed by security forces during a demonstration in Sitra. On July 23, 53-year-old Zahra Kadhem Ali reportedly suffered a fatal heart attack when security forces arrived at her home in Bani Jamrah to arrest her adolescent son. On August 15, 19-year-old Seyed Ali Amin from the village of Karbabad died in police custody, reportedly after being beaten and tortured during interrogation at the police station in the village of Khamis. To date the Government has not investigated or prosecuted any police or security force personnel for these incidents.

Seven expatriate laborers died on March 14 when antigovernment protesters barricaded them in a restaurant in the village of Sitra and set the building on fire. One expatriate was also killed under similar circumstances in a separate arson attack in September.

b. Disappearances

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment are prohibited by law. There are credible reports, however, that prisoners often are beaten, both on the soles of their feet and about the face and head, burned with cigarettes, forced to endure long periods without sleep, and in some cases are subjected to electric shock. At least one death probably occurred as a result of torture during detention

(see Section 1.a.). The Government has difficulty in rebutting allegations of torture and of other cruel, inhuman, or degrading practices because it permits incommunicado detention and detention without trial. There were no known instances of authorities being punished for human rights abuses committed either this year or in any previous year.

Opposition and human rights groups allege that the security forces sometimes threaten female detainees with rape and inflict other sexual abuses and harassment on them while they are in custody. These allegations are difficult either to confirm or deny.

One death and one injury resulted from opposition bombing attacks on hotels and businesses in 1996. On June 30, a man was killed when an explosive device he was allegedly planting at a banking site detonated prematurely. On March 19, a female employee was severely injured when an explosive device detonated at a downtown hotel.

Prison conditions are reportedly deteriorating. There are credible reports that, because of overcrowding, the Government is now experiencing difficulties in providing prisoners with adequate sanitation, sleeping areas, food, water, and health care.

At the Government's invitation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) sent a delegation to inspect the prisons in November. ICRC inspections are reportedly to continue into 1997.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The 1974 Constitution stated that "no person shall be arrested, detained, imprisoned, searched or compelled to reside in a specified place...except in accordance with the provisions of the law and under the supervision of the judicial authorities." In practice, however, in matters regarding arrest, detention, or exile, the 1974 State Security Act takes precedence. Under the State Security Act, persons may be detained for up to 3 years without trial for engaging in activities or making statements regarded as a threat to the broadly defined concepts of national harmony and security, and the Government continued to arbitrarily arrest and detain citizens. In March the scope of the State Security Act of 1974 was expanded to include any case involving arson, explosions, or attacks on persons at their place of employment or because of the nature of their work. Detainees have the right to appeal such detentions after a period of 3 months and, if the appeal is denied, every 6 months thereafter from the date of the original detention.

Government security forces used the State Security Act regularly during 1996 to detain persons believed by the Government to be engaging in antiregime activities, as well as those attempting to exercise their right of free speech, association, or other rights deemed to be in opposition to the Government. Activities that can also lead to detention, questioning, warning, or arrest by the security forces include: membership in illegal organizations or those deemed subversive; painting antiregime slogans on walls; joining antigovernment demonstrations; possessing or circulating antiregime writings; preaching sermons considered by the Government to have an antiregime political tone; and harboring or associating with persons committing such acts.

In addition to overseeing the security service and police, the Ministry of Interior also controls the Office of the Public Prosecutor, whose officers initially determine whether sufficient evidence exists to continue to hold a prisoner in investigative detention. The Ministry is responsible for all aspects of prison administration. In the early stages of detention, prisoners and their attorneys have no recourse to any authority outside the Ministry of Interior. The authorities rarely permit visits to inmates who are incarcerated for security-related offenses and such prisoners may be held incommunicado for months,

sometimes years. Prisoners detained for criminal offenses, however, generally may receive visits from family members, usually once a month.

The number of women detained for questioning or placed under arrest for antigovernment offenses increased during 1996. However, credible sources within the legal profession state that the authorities do not as a rule hold women in detention for long periods.

Security forces are estimated to have held over 3,000 people in detention in 1996, including some who were arrested, released, and then arrested again. At year's end, as many as 1,500 detainees still remained in detention.

Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, a prominent Shi'a cleric, longtime opposition activist, and one of the original 14 signers of the 1994 petition to the Amir calling for the restoration of the National Assembly, was arrested on January 21 and remains in detention. Al-Jamri is accused of committing a wide variety of security-related crimes, including treason. Several other Shi'a clerics associated with Al-Jamri, including Abdul Wahab Hussein, Hassan Mushaimaa, Hassan Sultan, Ali Bin Ahmed Al-Jedhafsi, and Haji Hassan Jarallah, were also arrested in January and remain in detention.

While the authorities reserve their right to use exile and the revocation of citizenship to punish individuals suspected of, or convicted of, antiregime activity, there were no reports of ex